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What's Worse Than Partisanship?

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 21, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

What is worse than partisanship? Ideology.

Yesterday, Speaker of the House John Boehner failed to garner a majority of his Republican caucus to support his ?Plan B? effort to avoid the fiscal cliff. As GOP consultant Craig Shirley observed, ?If this was a parliamentary system, tonight?s dissent on Plan B would have been seen as a vote of no confidence in Boehner. The national GOP is now simply a collection of warring tribal factions.? Mr. Shirley is right about the vote of no confidence, another indicator of the value of a parliamentary system: It enforces immediate accountability.

But, Shirley is not correct about a collection of factions. The vote in caucus was a binary vote to stick to their anti-tax ideology or to support their own Speaker in his effort to achieve a bipartisan compromise. As Congressman Mike Kelly of Pennsylvania said at the conclusion of the vote ? the Post reports he ?screamed? the words: ?Really? We can?t support our Speaker?? They couldn?t.

The Post reports that some members claimed to be worried a vote for the measure would result in a primary challenge. Primaries are low-turnout events, so those who are most motivated tend to exercise enormous influence and, in today?s GOP, the Tea Party no-tax mantra is still alive and well. Here is why it is a bit difficult to feel sorry for Boehner. He and other moderate Republicans have been stoking the flames among the Tea Party crowd, mouthing the chants, encouraging them in their extremeness. It should surprise no one that the Tea Partyers themselves, disdainful of Washington to begin with, do not appreciate the Speaker?s need to strike a deal. It should surprise no one that by listening to Sean Hannity and the crowd at Fox urging the GOP not to give in on taxes, they remain resistant to any deal. Boehner?s speakership is being consumed by a fire he helped to start.

The current spectacle makes on yearn for the days of the smoke-filled room where politicians of all stripes understood that when you are fighting over numbers, you add the two numbers together and divide by two. Boehner was set to agree to higher taxes on millionaires. Obama?s last position was higher taxes on those making $400k. The obvious compromise: $700k. These kinds of negotiations should not be the stuff endangering the already fragile economic recovery. For all that was rotten and corrupt about the smoke-filled rooms, they never failed to extend the nation?s debt ceiling. They did the nation?s business because they understood that, first and foremost, that was their job.

Which leads to the ugliest part of this ideologically driven moment. The members of the House GOP who failed to support Speaker Boehner yesterday showed that they not only have contempt for him, and for the norms of partisan behavior in Congress, they have contempt for the American electorate. President Obama won re-election and it was no secret where he stood on raising taxes. More Americans voted for Democrats for Congress than for Republicans. Republicans need not embrace the President program in toto, to be sure, but failing to support their own Speaker who was moving fast towards a respectable compromise, this is stunning.

In the good old days, if you challenged your own Speaker, you were exiled to lousy committee assignments. There was partisan discipline, perhaps too much partisan discipline. But, today, special interest groups driven by

ideological concerns are far stronger than either party structure. The country is not better off for that change.

I do not know what Speaker Boehner will do now. It is doubtful the Democrats will come to his aid by promising a united caucus on their side of the aisle in favor of any compromise, and it is doubtful Boehner could pass a compromise measure with only three dozen GOP votes and sustain his Speakership. A significant portion of today?s GOP caucus would rather risk another recession than cross swords with their ideological playmates. It should not shock that extremists are extreme. It should shock that they are powerful.

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